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Corps revising N.O. flood-insurance maps for FEMA

First update in 20 years will take drainage improvements into account

NEW ORLEANS – The City of New Orleans, the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers are partnering to develop new flood-insurance rate maps for New Orleans.

The Corps and the City of New Orleans are working together to make effective use of the FEMA funding, said Shawn Vicknair, the Corps' project manager.

"Extensive drainage improvements have been made in New Orleans since the maps were last updated in 1984," Vicknair said.

"Taking into account these improvements might lead to reduced flood-insurance premiums in some areas. But the update results should be in hand before drawing any conclusions on rates or other flood-plain issues," Vicknair said.

It is expected that the results from the study will be available in late 2005, as preliminary Digital Flood-Insurance Rate Maps for the entire city. FEMA's adoption of digital format will make possible continuous updates, avoiding long intervals between revisions.

More information will be provided and public meetings will be scheduled as the study progresses.

Jay Ratcliff, the leader of the Corps' team that is creating the digital maps, said the information for transportation systems and waterways came from the City of New Orleans. This provided two of the layers being combined into complete maps.

"The layers for the flood zones and the base-flood elevation lines are being developed by models from our Hydraulics and Hydrology Branch. The base flood is a 100-year event, a flood that has a 1 percent probability of occurring in a given year," Ratcliff said.

For elevations, The Corps used new FEMA data created by lidar, a laser technology analogous to radar, Ratcliff said.

The job is part of a map modernization project under FEMA's Flood Hazard Mapping Program. FEMA has embarked on map modernization because about 85 percent of the Flood-Insurance Rate Maps are at least five years old, and one third of them are more than 15 years old.

Goals of the map-modernization program also include heightened public awareness of flood risks, increased community involvement and improved customer service.

The drainage improvements in New Orleans were made by the Sewerage & Water Board of New Orleans and, after 1995, by the Corps and the Sewerage & Water Board as partners in the SELA rain-flood project. SELA's full name is the Southeast Louisiana Urban Flood Control Project.

The Digital Flood-Insurance Rate Maps will provide the means for FEMA and the city to identify the areas where revisions to floodplain management practices and/or revised flood-insurance premiums are warranted. The updated maps will provide the city with a better picture of the flood risks in New Orleans.

The digital maps will allow the local government and other users to update hydrologic and hydraulic data as drainage improvements are placed in service, such as future SELA projects. In addition to flood insurance, the new maps will also be useful in public works and geographic information systems, and to floodplain managers and developers.

Map Modernization Program <http://www.digitalfloodmap.org/flood/>

FEMA flood mapping <http://www.fema.gov/fhm/>

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